

On Animal Planet, Aquatic Apes, a/k/a Mermaids

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We watched a 90-minute documentary on Animal Planet last night (recorded from the day before) called *Mermaids: The Body Found*, about a team of scientists with forensic evidence of “mermaids” (aquatic apes that split from our line some 7 million years ago).

The documentary interviews scientists, plays audio recordings of anomalous sounds from oceanographic scientists, shows suspicious videotape, some artifacts that look like tools, even evidence of a purported government cover-up. It also includes hearty portions of CGI animation of what the mermaids would look like, etc. In other words, a typical documentary from a Discovery Channel-affiliated network.

After a few minutes, however, we realized that the entire thing must be fictional — that is, more fictional than the typical “this is just what they were like millions of years ago” stuff you see on TV documentaries. Yet at no point was there any disclaimer saying it was a fake documentary. In fact, the “scientists” interviewed were supposedly from real places like the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the University of Witwatersrand, South Africa. The Animal Planet website lists it straightforwardly [on the schedule](#).

Snopes lists the program [as a hoax](#), but provides no link in which Animal Planet or an official website explains that it is fictional.

The [film website](#) takes you to a page that says it has been seized by the Department of Homeland Security. Hey, wouldn’t that be illegal?

In case this isn’t confusing enough already, the [press release](#) includes links that would lead you to believe these people think the Aquatic Ape theory deserves serious consideration. It sort of explains that it is a “stunt” and “science fiction” but also seems to say that the documentary is based on facts and responsible hypothesizing, or something like that.

Well, all too often we see articles in biology journals that mix a few facts with a lot of wild evolutionary speculation. You get the feeling that the makers of *Mermaids: The Body Found* see themselves as doing something akin to what the authors of such articles are doing. After all, the Aquatic Ape theory was first proposed in *New Scientist* in 1960! At least the Animal Planet folks recognize (some of) the frankly fictional aspects of their story.

In any event, we’re left with the vague feeling that “scientific” culture has crossed a threshold here, in which the distinction between fact and fiction, one might say between sanity and insanity, so long violated in science documentaries involving origins, is now being intentionally blurred.